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AUTHOR Bass, Christopher K.; Coleman, Hardin L. K.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the development of a school-based Afrocentric intervention for middle school male adolescents who are at risk for academic failure or underachievement. The intervention combined the principles of the rites of passage movement within African American communities and current thinking on the process of second culture acquisition to focus on developing the participants' sense of ethnic self as a precursor to academic performance. The Afrocentric rites of passages movement is designed to provide African American males with the grounding in their culture of origin that they need to negotiate the challenges facing them in Eurocentric environments. Six African American males in the sixth grade of a predominantly European American urban middle school participated. The results of this intervention suggest that this is an approach to at-risk adolescent African American males that warrants further attention. An appendix describes the intervention, which began with four months of participation in the "Kwanzaa" group which was primarily social but dedicated to learning Afrocentric principles. The second phase of the program, the Sphinx Club, emphasized applying the principles learned earlier in the year. (Contains 1 table and 22 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Enhancing the Cultural Identity of Early Adolescent Male African Americans

Christopher K. Bass and Hardin L.K. Coleman

University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Enhancing the Cultural Identity of Early Adolescent Male African Americans

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on the development of a school-based Africentric intervention for middle school male adolescents who are at risk for academic failure or underachievement. This intervention combined the principles of the rites of passage movement within African American communities and current thinking on the process of second culture acquisition to focus on developing the participants' sense of ethnic self as a precursor to academic performance. The results of this investigation suggest that this is an approach to at-risk African American adolescent males that warrants further attention.

Enhancing the Cultural Identity of Early Adolescent Male African Americans

Research suggests that African American males are at higher risk for dropping out of school, engaging in criminal activity, being a perpetrator or victim of a violent crime, and being incarcerated than their European American peers. Gill (1991a) reported that the Center for the Study of Social Policy predicted that 70% of working age African American men will be jailed, dead, alcoholic or hooked on drugs by the year 2000, that the Department of Justice reported that 1 out of 4 African American men was in jail or under court supervision and that there were more African American men in their 20's under court control than there are African American men enrolled in college. Gill cites The Institute for the Advanced Study of Black Life report to remind us that one in every three African American men, ages 20 to 24, is a potential homicide victim. These are only a few of the horrific statistics about African American men in this society, yet they represent problems of monumental proportions.

There are several theories that serve to explain the etiology of this problem. The first theory is that African

Americans are targeted for genocide by a genetically inferior yet oppressive dominant culture (Welsing, 1991). A second suggests that these statistics result from the failure of main stream educational systems to effectively work with the needs of African American males (Ladson-Billings, 1994). A third is that African Americans doubt their own ability to achieve in American society (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). It is important for school counselors to be sensitive to the members of the African American community that share Welsing's perspective and be prepared to discuss the use of that interpretation to explain student achievement. It is equally important that they learn to work with educational systems to help them become more responsive to the needs of African American students and to work directly with the students to help remove internal obstacles to academic accomplishment. The purpose of this paper is to describe a school-based Africentric program designed to prepare African American males to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available to them within the current educational system. We will discuss the program's theoretical premises and share a report on its'

effectiveness. Finally we will discuss the importance of this type of group in addressing the needs of African American males.

Issacs and Duffus (1992) found that many ethnic minority students do not value and do not attain academic achievement and attainment. When the first author asked a handful of African American middle school students about their attitudes towards academic achievement their responses were; " It's not for me", "the teachers go too fast" and "they don't talk about what I know." One reason there is a lack of value placed on academic achievement and attainment in African American male students is that the Eurocentric curriculum used in most public schools favors students who process information in a logical, sequential, linear and/or judgmental fashion. Studies indicate, however, that most non-white students learn and process information in an abstract, non-sequential, non-linear style (Thompson, 1992). Additionally, African American male adolescents' lack of interest in school can be attributed to the absence of African history and culture in formal education materials and lessons (Hillard, 1989). African American students do not see themselves in either the content or process of

American schools and feel, therefore, that school is not for them. The results of this experience is a significant reduction in academic aspirations and performance.

Traditionally African American underachievers have been encouraged to learn how to negotiate the Eurocentric school culture in order to succeed (Ladson-Billings, 1994). This approach does not help the student resolve the cultural dilemma that may lead to underachievement in the first place. Several authors in discussions of second culture acquisition have argued that an effective method for managing the personality dislocation that can be the result of acculturation stress is to learn how to become biculturally competent (Coleman, 1995; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Padilla, 1980). Traditional interventions with underachieving African American males have focused on gaining competence in the Eurocentric culture rather than reinforcing competence in the African American culture. In this investigation we use LaFromboise et al's hypothesis that becoming grounded in the values and social support systems of one's culture of origin is a necessary precursor to developing and demonstrating competence in a second culture.

Just as social and psychological factors affect African American students' academic motivation and academic performance within the school setting, cultural forces within the African American community may conflict with those of the majority culture represented within the school. Many ethnic minorities handle the ambivalence associated with trying to fit into several different worlds by developing what Hale (1982) calls personality dislocation. He argues that much of mainstream culture is in conflict with African American culture and cannot be easily integrated without some personality dislocation. As the personality is dislocated, the African American male student may believe that this system is not designed to help him and thus develop learned helplessness (LaFromboise et al., 1993). As ethnic minority students struggle with their sense of self, they may experience a lack of self-esteem and academic motivation. As a result of this acculturative stress, they may exhibit the characteristics found in students who underachieve. Examples of these characteristics are: external locus of control and low sense of self efficacy (Schunk, 1991); low self concept (Jordon, 1981); low sense of adequacy, feeling isolated, and having self-

contempt (Ford, 1991; Ford & Harris, 1991; Ford, Schuerger, & Harris, 1991). As Ford et al. have suggested, it is important to remember that minority students who are achieving may also have identity development needs that focus on their racial identity as well as their achievement identity.

The Africentric Rites of Passages Movement is designed to provide African American males with the grounding in their culture of origin that they need to negotiate the challenges facing them in Eurocentric environments. This movement suggests that African American males must develop a positive sense of their cultural self in order to develop personal self-esteem, as it is one of the variables most frequently identified as having a relationship to minority undereducation and underachievement (Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life, 1988).

The African American Rites of Passage Movement aims to instill a strong, positive sense of self and achievement in the participants. Rites of Passage programs have much in common with independent African American schools because they address needs that are not met by the traditional, secular, and Eurocentric system of education. Warfield-

Coppock (1992) says the African American Rites of Passage initiative differs from the independent school concept in that it addresses the total person, not just the academic facilities used in the process of acquiring knowledge. Rites of Passage programs need to offer the same social experience, but with an emphasis on academic achievement, cultural and self knowledge, character building, and virtue (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). The rites of passage can be considered a social and cultural inoculation process that facilitates healthy, African-centered development among African American youth and protects them against the ravages of a racist, sexist, capitalist and oppressive society.

The program described in this study was designed to create an environment inside the school setting that promotes academic motivation and academic performance in African American males in the middle schools. This paper reports on the results of a pilot study that was designed to use a Africentric rites of passages process with African American males who were starting their middle school experience and were identified as being at-risk for academic underachievement. We hypothesized that by teaching these students about the seven Kwanzaa principles, and then

helping them learn to apply these principles in their academic lives, these students' performance on a variety of school related behaviors would improve over the course of the school year.

Method

Participants

Six African American males in the sixth grade of a predominately European American middle school in a small mid-western city agreed to participate in the program. They were identified as at-risk for academic underachievement and referred to the group by the school social worker and psychologist. They were treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Measures

Classroom Behavior Scale (CBS). The primary method for assessing progress in the program was by having teachers rate the participants' behavior using the CBS. This measure was created for this investigation. It asks the teacher to rate the participants' performance on the following dimensions: (a) being on time to class, (b) staying in seat, (c) being prepared for class, (d) following

directions, (e) working hard or finishing work, and (f) being respectful of others. A student received 0, 1 or 2 points for each dimension depending on the degree to which he demonstrated the targeted behavior, with a 0 meaning the student did not demonstrate the target behavior and a 2 meaning that he did so on a regular basis.

Academic goals. The participants academic goals (their desired grade in each class) were set during the first half of the intervention and progress was evaluated at the end of the school year. All goals were reviewed by the faculty advisor to the program to ensure that the goals were realistic.

Disciplinary records. Starting at the beginning of the second semester, the participants started each weekly session by reporting the number of times they were sent to the office on a discipline referral. The first author kept track of these reports and verified them with the front office. This data is reported by month for the whole group.

Grade point average (GPA). The participants' GPA's at the end of the first semester and second semester were collected from the participants' cumulative school records. The mean of the participants' GPA's were used in the

analysis.

Design and Procedure.

To test our hypothesis, six African American sixth graders were recruited to participate in a 20 week group intervention that was led by the first author. A description of the intervention is in the Appendix. The students were referred to the group by the school social worker or psychologist. The criteria, in addition to being African American, for inclusion were, (a) academic performance below the student's capacity according to informal teacher evaluations and (b) consistent problems with controlling behavior in the classroom as reflected in a higher than school average rate of referrals for disciplinary actions. Once identified, the students were contacted by the first author to determine their level of interest. If the student was interested, the first author then sought permission for participation from the student's guardian.

During the first 10 weeks of the intervention, the group met once a week between the end of the school day and the departure of the late bus, about 45 minutes. During that time period the participants were taught the Kwanzaa principles of, (a) Umoja (unity), (b) Kujichagulia (self-

determination) , (c) Ujima (collective work and responsibility) (d) Ujamma (cooperative economics), (e) Nia (purpose), (f) Kuumba (creativity), and (f) Imani (faith) (Karenga, 1980). These 10 weeks were also used to build trust between the participants and group leader and trust within the group. At the end of that time, the participants graduated into the second phase of the intervention. At this time, their GPA's were recorded, academic goals were set and the teachers started completing the CBS on a weekly basis. During the final 10 weeks of the intervention, the focus was on how to put the Kwanzaa principles into practice. During each session, participants shared with the group the challenges they were facing living out these principles and reaching their academic goals. Each student was responsible for keeping a chart of his behavior and had to share a monthly self-evaluation with the group. At the end of the intervention, a record was made as to how well the participants had achieved their academic goals. At the end of the school year, their GPA's were recorded.

Results

To evaluate the effects of this intervention we used a single case replicated design focusing on last 10 weeks of

the intervention. Although one of the participants dropped out of school during the course of the program, more than 80% of Sphinx Club members achieved their academic goals during the school year and the collective GPA of the group increased by over 45%, from an average of 1.9 before the program to 2.51 at the end. A paired *t*-test revealed that this change was significant at an alpha level of .11. ($t = -2.06$, $df = 4$, $p = .11$). As indicated in Table 1, all the behaviors over which the participants had direct control, preparation for class, following directions, working hard, finishing work, and being respectful of others improved over the course of the intervention. Those behaviors that are still controlled by others in middle school, being on time to class and being in their seats, remained stable. Most dramatically, disciplinary referrals of participants fell from an average of 11 a month in January to 0.5 in April.

Although there was no systematic method employed to evaluate the program qualitatively, the first author kept a record of comments made about the program. The three teachers who had students in the program reported that the students showed significant changes in classroom behavior as well as academic performance. Both the school psychologist

and social worker commented on the efficacy of the program particularly in the reduced number of disciplinary referrals for this group of students. On two separate occasions, parents of the participants contacted the first author to report on how well the program had helped their children. The parents noted the sudden increase in grades and decrease in detention problems. They stated that they wished the program could be continued throughout their child's middle school years.

Insert Table 1 Here

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to report on the effects of a program that was designed to test the hypothesis that African American males who are at-risk for academic underachievement would benefit from being grounded in their culture of origin as a stepping stone for academic achievement(LaFromboise, et al., 1993). Our findings support the hypothesis. In the rest of this paper we discuss research and clinical implications of these findings, as well as study limitations.

Our findings suggest that academic motivation in African American male students can be increased through acquisition of knowledge concerning their culture of origin. Through the exposure to African culture, it's symbols and traditions, African Americans can gain an understanding of the African worldview. Through exposure to the African worldview, young African American men can better understand and appreciate their culture in this society. This leads to an increasing positive sense of cultural and personal self. Current research on academic motivation has shown that positive self esteem facilitates higher levels of academic motivation (Jordan, 1981; Schunk, 1991). This study indicates that Sphinx Club members improved their knowledge of African cultures, symbols and thought, and dramatically decreased behavior problems and incidents of delinquency. The findings suggest similar programs be introduced as a component of guidance programs in schools that have a significant population of African American males who are experiencing academic underachievement as a secondary intervention. These results support the argument that helping African American children and adolescents gain an understanding of their cultural identity may also be a

valuable component of primary prevention programming.

There are limitations to this investigation. The number of participants was small, there was no control group, and there was no random assignment, all of which makes it difficult to account for the effect of the group leader and setting versus the intervention on the change in participants' performance. Furthermore, there is no reliability estimates or construct validation for the measure that was used to evaluate the participants performance. As a clinical trial, however, results support the hypothesis being tested. Viewing this investigation from an intensive case design perspective in which participants serve as their own controls and are expected to know the research hypotheses, the limitations stated above are best viewed as recommendations for further research.

Our findings suggest that this program deserves replication with a larger sample and with different populations. Would it be as successful a larger urban school, or one with a larger percentage of African American students? It is also important to determine the degree to which the success of this intervention was a function of the ethnic and gender match between the group leader and

participants. Would such a program be effective if led by a European American woman? This is an important question as that is the common group membership for middle school student personnel service providers.

As suggested by the distressing statistics cited at the beginning of this paper, society will be served by implementing effective programs that facilitate academic aspirations and achievement of African American males. The intervention reported in this paper represents one such possibility. These findings are of particular value for the school counselor in settings where there is a higher rate of academic underachievement among African American students than other groups. These findings suggest that it is as important to focus on the acquisition of a strong cultural identity as it is to acquire academic skills. *This investigation suggests that African American students need a strong sense of their cultural selves in order to use the academic skills they possess.* School counselors are, therefore, encouraged to introduce this type of opportunity into their repertoire of secondary prevention, developmental guidance, and primary prevention programming. If they feel underqualified to lead such a group, then we believe it is

important that they seek assistance from the community.

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Table 1

Average of teachers' ratings of student's behavior during participation in the Sphinx club

Behavior	January	February	March	April
Discipline referrals	11.0	11.0	4.5	0.5
On time	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6
In seat	1.2	1.6	1.6	1.6
Prepared	0.8	1.2	1.4	1.4
Directions	0.8	1.0	1.6	1.8
Working hard/ Finishing work	0.6	1.2	1.4	1.8
Respectful of others	0.8	0.8	1.6	1.8

Appendix

Program Description

The intervention was divided into two phases. During the first four months of the school year, the students were involved in what was called the Kwanzaa group which was primarily social. In this group participants were taught the seven principles of Kwanzaa (Karenga, 1980). This was done to expose and connect the boys to positive images in the African American culture. Students also were introduced to Africentric lessons, themes and symbols. This was done to give exposure to an Africentric worldview which combines all aspects of education, life, community and nature. The purpose of the Kwanzaa group was to educate and facilitate an atmosphere of trust and exposure to Africentric principles.

At the end of the first four months, students graduated into the second phase of the intervention which was called the "Sphinx Club." The Sphinx Club lasted for the remainder of the first year in middle school. To reflect the rites of passage movement which emphasizes the completion of one stage and movement into another, the club operated in three phases. During the first phase participants are considered

Nomads; during the second phase they are called Journey men; and in the third phase they are called Pharaohs. The primary goal of each phase was to have participants learn how to apply certain Kwanzaa principles. Once a participant can demonstrate his ability to apply those principles, he graduates to the next phase. The passages between phases are celebrated in a ritualistic manner involving ceremonial exchanges of Africentric symbols such as an Ankh. For a complete description of the program, please contact the first author.